Spacing Times, Telling Times and Narrating the Past.

Mike Crang.

Abstract.

This paper takes one institution, the museum, and suggests how this institution organises understandings of time. Museums are seen as actively organising practices that sustain certain views of the world. The paper takes a single case study to illustrate how such practices may be currently organised. It suggests that while analysis of cultural grammar may be illuminating, a narratological perspective is required in order to analyse practices in modern museums. Thus it is suggested that studies of narrativity may shed some light on contemporary understandings of temporality.

Introduction.

This paper focuses on an institution dedicated to organising temporal categories - the museum. I wish to suggest that the museum is one of the institutions where society is communicating, reiterating to itself, an understanding of the flow of time. Thus museums can be seen as:-

> "A potent social metaphor and ... a means whereby societies represent their relationship to their own history and to that of other cultures. Museums, in this sense, map out geographies of taste and values, which is an especially difficult and controversial task when it is necessary to redraw the maps in response to major social change."
>
> Lumley (1988:1).

One can certainly unpack the categories of who is communicating to whom in the sweeping claims made above (see for instance the work of Merriman 1991, Bourdieu & Darbel 1991). Thus, professional curators communicate not just pedagogically, but also in terms of intra-professional hierarchies competing and contesting in terms of their 'product' (Fleming 1992). Equally visitors can be using their visit as an 'information good' communicating their status both to equals and others (Kelly 1987). In this sense the universalism that museums claim masks power relations; the question is whose interests does this 'universal' advance (Bourdieu 1991)?

However, what must be unpacked is not just the notion of a homogeneous society in communion with itself but also the methods of communication that are used. It is on the mechanisms of communication that this paper focuses, while accepting that they are socially specific processes. Theories of textual

poetics, narration and temporality are deployed to study how a particular museum - the National Waterways Museum in Gloucester - represents the passage of time to its visitors. Though my account is kept at the level of 'textual configuration', it shows how the museum relies on visitors narratively (re-)configuring the meaning of the displays. We are dealing, I suggest, with an active, generative situation rather than a static system that simply produces 'meanings'. So, in the first section, I outline some elements of narrative theory and how narrative generates a temporal dynamic in practices. Next, I provide some background on the organisation of the National Waterways Museum. Finally I show how it is insufficient to interpret this museum with grammatical accounts alone, and argue the need for narrative theory.

Narrated Time: Theories of Narratives.

In this paper I shall mainly utilise the ideas of Paul Ricoeur in his magisterial series Time and Narrative (1984, 1985, 1988) to show the emplotment of events in narratives and to bring to the fore the temporality of such processes. While Ricoeur's work can be used as a guide, it shares, with museums, a tendency to claim universal importance for both the study and action of high culture. Thus posing a hazard that needs guarding against by giving more attention to power relations. Despite this caution, I argue that Ricoeur's ideas usefully emphasise the role of narrative practices in ordering the world. He argues that the experiential world is basically chaotic, that events do not occur in a ready-made, intelligible order. Rather, events have an order imposed on them by their emplotment into a narrative; their significance is given by their placement in a story.

To take an example, this morning I might have walked under a ladder; an event of minimal impact at the time. Instantly though, it suggests an ominous future course of events. The event is stretched forward in time by being emplotted in a superstitious narrative. As an alternative example, it could be that I am writing this just after a drastic computer failure. Given the superstition of my local area I know that bad luck comes in threes - so I rapidly sort through the day to realise that the alarm-clock didn't go off and in my hurry I forgot my hat whereupon it promptly rained on me all the way to work. Three events are now retrospectively emplotted in a woeful story. (See Fabian 1991 for the inspiration for this accounting of time). The significance of the events is therefore determined by their emplotment in the narrative. A second story can illustrate how the significance of events can be altered. Let us suppose that I return home to find that I have been burgled. I retell the day with the alarm clock and the rain compacted into one episode leaving the computer and burglary to make up three. The significance of events is not found within them but is located in how they are narrated. That is their meaning comes from the process of inter-signification between events and this process operates temporally. The reading subject distends itself into the past and future.

What Ricoeur seeks to dispel is the notion of time as a succession of point-like "nows". He regards this as 'inhuman' time that is subjected to a narrative configuring activity (1985:3) in the experience of people. As Castoriadis notes (1991, 1987), this argument raises the question of how an 'identitiary time', of discrete events in a chronological sequence, comes to be constructed. This public time cannot claim to be in some sense natural, for the practice of narration distends each 'point' into the past and future. The present, as 'point', is replaced with the notion of passing. In this sense human

action is placed in a Heideggerian framework of 'within-time-ness' (Ricoeur 1984:61). All human activity is subject to a projective thrownness (Carr 1986:39), in that all activity is already immersed in a historical stream and already engaged with the past and future. Experience is distended because life is always 'Being-ahead-of-itself' (Ricoeur 1988:64), embroiled in a future with which it must cope using understandings organised from the past (DeConcini 1990). Thus, Carr (1986) suggests that each human action already has a basic narrative structure. Narratives are not just added to an inchoate temporality by interpretive practices. Adapting Merleau-Ponty's example (1963), when we see the face of a cube it is seen as part of an object extended in space. Likewise any moment is just part of a temporal object that is extended in time. Events are already narrative, that is, they are performed with respect to a possible future and based on an interpretation of the past. Ricoeur suggests that this is part of a human need to provide meaning to events through narrative closure; what he has termed "the tragic will to totalise" (1992). Borrowing from Schutz, Carr suggests this envisaged endpoint is a 'future perfect' (1986:78); we look on our present and past as if from a possible point in the future and then make sense of events in order to support that position.

The implication of such analyses is that narratives temporally situate practices. When one is in the middle of a Hitchcock film, understandings of the previous events portrayed and the possible outcomes are kept open awaiting radical and probably repeated revision. (Such a process allows one to create interpretations never intended in the original script.) But equally, our attempts to emplot things in coherent narratives do not always succeed. For although narratives require events to be part of a whole, events are also spatially extended in a series. Our synoptic judgement that knits stories into a

meaningful whole, does not have an infallible view. The idea of the 'future perfect' view leaves room for error and mystery and also resolves the need for retrospective intelligibility (Ricoeur 1984:157). While in the stream of activity it enables a sense of progressive contingency, allowing new occurrences and twists in the plot, but also the ascription of meaning to events (Ricoeur 1985:39). Meanwhile, the events must be able to support the various resolutions (Castoriadis 1991,1987). Thus-

> "Looking back from the conclusion to the episodes that lead up to it, we have to be able to say that this ending required these sort of events and this chain of actions. But this backward look is made possible by the teleological movement directed by our expectations when we follow the story. This is the paradox of contingency".
>
> Ricoeur (1980:174).

It is my contention that this narrative theory can also apply to museums. Museums can be understood as machines that inscribe time on space. The museum building, through its layout, its spatial configuration, organises time within its walls (Harbison 1977:146). Museums tend to encapsulate time, using their analytic categories to segment it and present it in terms of periodised displays and galleries. Time is manipulated in terms of the amount and organisation of the space accorded to historic events, with no fixed formula relating the amount of space to the duration of the event. Rather the amount of space is decided by the significance and importance of the event, and reciprocally marks the event as significant and important. There is no need for a chronological sequence, one can jump ahead in time or flash-back. However, instead of aiming to create a 'suspension of disbelief' (as in fiction), most institutions create a series of spaces that are ordered to give coherence and meaning to their contents

(Harbison 1977:147). As such the spaces are not sufficient to themselves but mutually implicating, linking the sense of one with the others. To cross the threshold is to enter a symbolic stage that supports the poetics and narratives the museum works to inscribe on itself. But such poetics rely upon the practices of the viewer. And I wish to suggest that in museums, like the National Waterways Museum in Gloucester, the tendency is to call upon narrative practices. The 'wandering subjectivity' of the visitors is called to reach forwards to grasp the possible path and outcomes of a story, while also reaching back along their path to make sense of a display.

The National Waterways Museum: A Story-Driven Institution.

In the light of the above theories it seems significant that in the post-war period, and the more recent heritage boom, narratives have become the organising principle in several heritage institutions. These institutions cannot rely on didactic methods that focus on an intellectual, cognitive communication since a large potential audience does not seek such an experience (Annis 1986). Many heritage centres downplay the custodial role of museums since they are not based on collections of objects. Rather than conceiving of themselves as shrines or treasure-houses of priceless relics, they exhibit features and items from the everyday. Such institutions cannot use displays that rely on visitors knowing taxonomies of objects that, in turn, rely on the values of dominant groups (Macdonald and Silverstone 1990:181). Instead, they link their exhibits to visitors through affective narratives. They are story-driven rather than object-driven. The narratives are often aimed to encourage visitor identification with past peoples, via the bond of a shared humanity, and particularly through a sense of the everyday (Silverstone 1988:140). Displays tend to show the changing

values assigned to objects in their use. Objects are given biographies by situating them in narratives, both in terms of an overall history and in terms of illustrative vignettes. It is this action that I suggest has implications for the way museums make sense of historical time. I shall examine this contention using the case of the National Waterways Museum at Gloucester.

This museum is located, along with two others, in renovated docks next to a shopping arcade, an antiques market and an office development. The whole area had fallen into disuse by the 1970s as trade on the Gloucester - Sharpness canal declined. The museum is housed in an old warehouse, left redundant by falling industrial use of inland waterways. It is either ironic or fitting that such an area should be 'regenerated' by a museum concerned with its former use. The old warehouse still has its industrial facade. Once inside the building there are very few glimpses of the outside world (and then only in interstitial moments, such as when one leaves the exhibits to change floors). Visitors have to follow a path from display to display. It is totally unlike Harbison's analogy of the museum and the dictionary (1977:145) since there is little choice about the order in which to approach exhibits: visitors must pass through one display to reach the next. There are few ways of by-passing sections. Even then, there is no form of guidance for picking and choosing a route apart from the sequential arrangement of exhibits. Indeed subsequent sections are often not visible from preceding ones. The visitor is drawn along a set path picking up elements of story then stopping at vignettes. This appears to be a trend that is influencing design in such diverse locations as the Timewalk in Weymouth, the Amsterdam Historical Museum and proposals for the Canadian Museum of Civilisation.

On entering the museum there is a brief display of placards to set the scene for canal building in 1793. "Would you invest?" visitors are asked. Passing into the next display the visitor is confronted with a video. This depicts a rural idyll accompanied by chamber music. But visitors are told this is the beginning of an era of great changes, with a significant parallel to the French revolution, and they are given vignettes discussing the arrival of canals and how life will be changed. A variety of characters express their fears and opinions. A company agent stresses profits and the chance to link factories, markets and raw materials. An investor, talking with the agent, evinces fears that canals will ruin his land, by bringing unsightly industrial uses to his own area. Villagers betray a fear of navvies as, "Lecherous, drunken, violent. That's what I hear. Like as not we'll all be murdered in our beds". They also discuss whether it will only be the cities that gain or whether they too will benefit from cheap goods. As the lights go down on this scene a voice-over rounds off the discussion and visitors must then move on to the next section.

Walking out from the opening diorama, visitors encounter a section full of industrial scenes and the (recorded) clank of steel. A panoply of industrial activity illustrates themes such as the disruption of rural economies, construction activity, changing market relations and the broadening economic system. All about there are facsimile newspaper reports of the beginning of canals - 'joy in the potteries as canal Bill passed'. There is a diorama of navvies at work, and more background noise of cheering at the completion of a canal. The inquisitive can stop and read explanations of how people are glad that they may be able to get cheap goods. All visitors have to keep following the twisting line of displays. After a while mention of rail competition occurs. Time is passing rapidly as visitors move through the displays. Suddenly there is

another video - of old men discussing their memories of working on the canals. By the end of the floor displays are dealing with post-war nationalisation and pictures from the sixties. There are exhibits here of the trading connections of Gloucester along with pictures and artefacts from the docks' industrial past.

The next floor still follows a wandering pattern but now there are displays illustrating different facets of canals. One display charts the growth and decline of the canal network. Then an interactive game explains how locks work, followed by pictures of locks on the waterways. From thence to the next section the visitor has to pass through the mock-up of a tunnel while the museum deals with this topic. Emerging visitors encounter a section of tow-path with a fox on it. A display on aqueducts is followed by one on maintenance (where visitors can stand with their heads inside divers' helmets looking into an aquarium made to look like the inside of a canal). A brief section about life on the canals is followed by some artefacts and cut-aways of boats and a simulator to allow visitors to drive a barge. The exit from this trail is then out through the inevitable gift shop.

The Emplotment of Events.

The techniques of structural linguistics have been widely applied in cultural analyses. Based on an idea of structures organising meanings the analyst attempts to reconstruct the cultural grammar expressed in an institution. Such analyses tend to be founded on a synchronic system of mutually referring signifiers (Carr 1986:50). The first part of this section illustrates how such 'paradigmatic' relations are instantiated in the museum. But I wish to argue

that paradigmatic interpretations must seek to include the activity and temporality of the observer. I show how my initial analysis relies on the structures it observes being enacted diachronically. The second part of this section, therefore, focuses on the often neglected 'syntagmatic' structure. Syntagmatic patterns are those to do with sequence and succession. Since the institution relies on displays being encountered in a sequence, I argue that syntagmatic patterns cannot be overlooked. One is left with a poorer understanding if one does not include the diachronic, syntagmatic practices of visitors. The balancing of sequential and holistic understanding appears to return us to the issues raised by theories of narrative comprehension. This balancing, I argue, is the constructive activity that articulates the representation of time in this particular museum.

1. Paradigmatic Operations

A paradigmatic analysis might begin to focus on the realm of metaphoric relations. In terms of Gloucester Docks, the whole area could be read as a metaphor for a transition from an industrial economy to one based on services. The former industrial area was in decline but is now reinvigorated by new forms of activity. Such a story could be interpreted as a condensation of a particular reading of recent British history. The decline and renewal metaphor also finds expression in the National Waterways Museum itself. The sections which show the canals as dynamic elements of industrialisation are symmetrically counterpointed to economic decline and a new rural idyll that is composed of leisure access to the waterways.

The substitution of leisure for work allows a topical closure to a story about the waterways of Britain - what might be termed a 'redemptive unity'

(LaCapra 1991:122). One can then begin to tease apart how this structure organises, and is embedded in, parts of the museum. The displays relate a world that used to be of work but has now been converted to leisure (cf Bennett 1988). There is a structural opposition between these two terms. They operate in a homologous opposition to those of modernity and tradition. The early sections of the museum portray the innovative, disruptive change brought to a preindustrial land. The later sections mark canals as signs of tranquillity. Industrial sections have few images of canals (their present association being so powerfully antiqued) but many period illustrations. The sections on leisure are marked with reconstructed tow paths, replete with signs of rural harmony. They provide a strong contrast with displays of unloading and toil. This structural opposition is elaborated by pictures that mark out the contrasts of modernity and a rusticated heritage, for example, there are pictures of Coca-cola being unloaded from a barge; the archetype of global capitalism in a vessel of the past.

Even from my brief account of the museum it should be apparent that a visitor would not encounter these oppositions: they must be constructed through her or his practices. Thus I now turn to Greimas in suggesting a temporality to these structures (Ricoeur 1985:49, ÅiÉek 1991). Following Greimas, one looks to not only binary oppositions but also to a utilisation of temporality in a 'semiotic square'. Such a square stretches oppositions in 2 directions, firstly towards an antipathetic term (eg white/black) and also towards a 'residual' (eg white/non-white). This posits at least another relation of 'residual' and opposite (ie non-white/black) and then first term and opposite of residual (ÅiÉek 1991, Greimas 1985). Thus an account can have a driving force from the first term to its opposite, so this is the next object of scrutiny, but be

unable effect closure due to the 'residual'. The Gloucester example could be read as being so ordered and then enacted spatially, so that the practices of visitors construct first a world of work and then its transformation into one of leisure. Thinking with Greimas we have a first term that is labour. This is the new economic world of industrialisation. "The country is undergoing a revolution. New towns and seaports are being built, new jobs are developing. Life in the towns with real wages and promises of freedom from toil on the land is tempting. Which life will you choose?". The opposite term (leisure and recreational use) is stressed in later sections. Thinking with Greimas also helps show how this opposition is sustained by a strategic absence. A 'residual' is excluded from this substitution - unemployment. The neat substitution of work then and leisure becomes rather less sustainable if one includes local industries destroyed by the competition that canals brought, or contemporary mass unemployment rather than post-industrial leisure (cf Shotter 1988).

The substitution of leisure for labour is spatially extended, in the series of displays one passes through. This synchronic opposition is a retrospective organisation of the displays of the museum. The visitor's passage through the prescribed route constructs the transformation of landscapes of labour into ones of leisure. And transformations are at the heart of narrative practices (Branigan 1992:49). As discussed earlier, it is only by looking back from the end of the story that the substitution appears. In Greimas, "Narrative becomes a special working through of contraries, subcontraries, converses and contradictories" (Branigan 1992:9).

2. Syntagmatic Operations.

I suggested before that there is a distinction between brute sequence and narrative. The displays outlined earlier are not 'enchained' in a succession; they are causally as well as chronologically related (Cohan & Shires 1988:57). Indeed so strong is this implication that seeing two events depicted in sequence is enough to promote speculation as to their logical connections (Eisenstein 1943). The museum makes use of this effect very strongly.

Let us return to the vignette of an agent persuading an investor. The investor fears the consequences of the canals, the social disruption and so forth, but the agent remains the voice of reason until the investor concludes "I dare say progress must have its way". This is followed by another cameo where rural villagers again appear fearful of change. They perform a plot role, as well as provide historical information. The canals are scripted as parts of an erupting modernity. The major anxiety of the representatives of the preindustrial countryside is focused on navvies. Turning the corner, the next display visitors find is of navvies discussing job opportunities, and the spate of engineering work. Walking on, the next section encountered is full of cheering for the completion of the canal and the new economic regime it has brought. Even in this half of one floor each display is referred to by the next, prefigures it and relies on the ones before it. Time is certainly not represented as a series of independent 'moments' as in 'identitiary time' (Castoriadis 1987). Some events do form satellites, small self-contained elements to add interest and variety. Some form the basis of the next section. The balance of redundancy to linearity is what provides the openness of the narrative as the visitor progresses through it - the forward openness in conjunction with the teleological orientation Ricoeur termed 'the paradox of contingency'. It is a fine balancing act of the

necessary and superfluous, providing opportunities for multiple interests while uniting the whole.

However what constitutes an event, as we saw in the first part of this paper, is defined narratively. For the above mentioned displays are all part of a section dealing with the boom of canals, a 'meta-event'. This is related to later sections that focus on the running of canals, the way they were used, or economic decline and the use of canals for leisure. Time is represented as being broken into periods. The first part of the museum with its overarching story of the rise and fall of canals can serve to temporally locate later sections. The process of location is reinforced by displays of the national canal network's expansion and decline, providing the more abstract schema that can be interpreted in terms of the events narrated about Gloucester. Likewise a section on boat design can be connected by the visitor to the cargos that are illustrated, engine and horse-power changes to the displays of footpaths. Tools and equipment can also be fitted into the periodisation, making connections to a past industrial period. In the last section I suggested that there was a paradigmatic relation between these different elements of the museum. Here I want to stress how they are syntagmatically structured by the visitors.

While walking around the path set out by the museum, visitors are asked to use narrative competences to interpret history. The section on building up the canal network, for example, stresses modernity and economic transformation. But by the time visitors are confronted by the decline of the canals and their restoration for leisure, canals have become identified with tradition. A crucial turning point is provided in the sections on the use of the canals. Among the historic artefacts is the aforementioned picture of a barge at Gloucester

unloading Coca-cola; we are invited to use our present associations of the product to create a distance from canal activity. Since Coca-cola is no longer taken by barge around the country, this section can form a marker for an end of an era. Likewise a section using a video of workers on the canals works to reposition the ideas of modernity stressed in earlier sections. The video is an oral history given by elderly former workers. Another marker of pastness rather than modernity?

Such scripting of the museum's contents comes through in other ways. Using everyday present knowledge, the nationalisation and attempted economic resuscitation of the canal system are emplotted as doomed. The futility of plans to make Gloucester "The Sea Gateway to the West Midlands" sets the scene for later sections on the subsequent successful revitalisation as a leisure resource. These are logical sequences rather than just temporal sequences or logical structures. It is possible logical sequences that can sustain interest, raise questions, intrigue, entertain and, yes, educate. Types of figures and displays play narrative roles in moving and developing the plot. They do this in addition to their historical role. Thus, by positioning canals as modern, the sections discussing canal building try to counteract visitors' initial associations in order to help them to understand the historical situation. Canals are portrayed not as part of the landscape but as the results of very modern forms of decision-making - helping bridge the distance to the past. The later oral history video works to transform and reposition canals as objects of the past, using reminiscences to associate them with a bygone era. With Ricoeur, one can see that these operations begin to use the different temporal perspectives of each section, that they act to reopen the future of the past as

contingent, and then act to close it down as a retrospective necessity. This is an effect that is reinforced by the narration of events.

Telling the Time: The Impact of Narration.

Narration is needed when knowledge of events is unevenly distributed between characters and audience (Branigan 1992:66). It can, therefore, fit with an educational situation. But narrative structures are not innocent tools. I wish to draw particular attention to the process whereby certain originary events are emplotted and given a conclusion. The account is thereby given an ending, in the sense of narrative resolution. Such a scenario is very close to criticisms made of 'heritage' in general, that it tends to provide history with an end point in, and justification for, the present (eg Hewison 1987).

The standard argument is that syntagmatic structures serve as permanent deferrals of meaning. In each event is implicated the possibility of another, and each new section can revise our interpretations of the earlier ones. It was suggested earlier that this deferral is ended by the closure provided by paradigmatic relations. The retrospective inevitability of the plot also acts to provide closure. But I want to emphasise how narration has a similar effect in this museum. Upon completion of a visit to the museum, and having passed through all the sections, the 'conclusion' is where the story of canals leads to the present day and the modern situation of canals as landscape features - for aesthetic and recreational use. The present is drained of contingency and set up as an end-point. Paradoxically, unlike sections about the past, it is not opened to future possibilities and revised appraisal. No narrative devices try to

provoke speculation on the future of canals; visitors are not drawn in to identify the museum as an elegant solution worked out in contingent circumstances - but as an outcome of an historical process.

Moreover the structure of narration adds to this effect. The narrator is mostly present in terms of labels and texts, but also appears as a disembodied voice (outside the events portrayed) in certain sections. In this museum, the narrator is the most common position from which to see history unfold. But the vignettes, where characters speak, provide an opportunity to be inside events (Cohan & Shires 1988; Branigan 1992:100). They provide a different avenue to understand events, a different focal point for a different perspective - such as where the agent and investor, or the village locals talk.

This focalization helps represent the past as exotic and as domestic. The character vignettes continually prompted me to empathise with the historical situations portrayed. The life-size recreations of canal scenes, and a presentation involving illuminated dioramas with dialogue, encouraged an imaginative link to the characters. The use of 'dialect', period music, and paintings as backing for various exhibits stress not so much historical process as the alterity of an exoticised past (Samuel 1992). This 'negative ontology', this sign of otherness (Ricoeur 1988:146), plays on a sense of time beyond experience. Yet the use of whole dioramas of lived contexts, as they might have been, works to de-distanciate the past and aid identification by relating to a sense of lived time (Ricoeur 1988:144).

Such character dialogues are marked as departures, as perspectives, from the neutral and impartial account of the narrator. The narrator's voice

mobilises ideas of detachment, objectivity and anonymous authority embodied in the texts and labels. This process works both ways, with the narrator giving a voice to the museum and the museum giving authority to the narrator. The effect is reinforced by the male, BBC received pronunciation which is counterposed to background noises and cameos where characters speak (Bennett 1988:65). The characters speak in dialect accents. While being an accurate protrayal and aiding understanding of their human situation, it accentuates the dispassionate voice of the narrator. The historical characters are accurately situated; the narrator aspires to a universal. And it is through the narrator that the visitor comes to know the events. An opposition between the narration of events by characters, in a rustic dialect, and the narrator's received pronunciation is crucially embedded in the authority structures of the institution. There is certainly little sense that the historian is implicated in the history discovered, or that the past is recreated and not merely found (Ricoeur 1984:97). The account of knowledge (the enunciated) is fundamentally separated from its creation (the place of enunciation). For a predominantly middle class audience such a voice may sound like a neutral universal. But, for subordinate groups it may be that this accent marks a specific, hegemonic site of enunciation. Thus one might identify, through the focalizers, against the narration. However, this does not appear to be the intended effect.

The male narrator gives voice to the museum's knowledge. But he aims to be an omniscient vantage point, a knowing commentator (Carr 1986:59). In this sense the inevitability of the story that is recounted is further reinforced, since the raconteur always knows the outcome. In that way the sense of contingency is markedly downplayed, since the situation is portrayed in terms of retrospective wisdom that can always see the significant order among the chaos of events.

Following Ricoeur, this form of narration allows the play of contingency, as the visitor progresses through the museum, but no radical retelling of the story. Alternative histories are inhibited by the teleology of the narrative. The omniscient narrator gives few prompts about what is omitted. Yet the missing topics are as vital to the account as those present (Shotter 1988). Indeed, in them, power relations are writ large. The account would be disrupted were one to suggest that the new economic order gave not only new choices to the areas touched by the canals but also produced new constraints on the formation of the British working class. The products from around the world are remembered here, not the conditions of their production. There is no recognition that the past that has been created is one that is useful to the present (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, Wright 1985:2). Despite using fictionalised vignettes, history is still set up as the immutable past; in other words, fiction is used as a rhetoric to make the past accessible. If anything the 'naturalistic' appeal of narratives serves to play down the artifice in the account, suggesting instead an illusion of unmediated reality (cf Jordanova 1989:33). The possibilities of using narratives to reveal the constructed nature of accounts are not explored.

Narration and Museums.

In conclusion, I want to draw out the wider strands that such an analysis implicates and its limitations. Firstly, the way museums use space to organise practices to represent time has to be recognized (Annis 1986:169). I wish to argue that the interpretation of this museum's representation of time depends on whether events are seen as being refigured according to our current needs or as already having some narrative structure. I have suggested that it is narrative

practices, rather than abstract structures, that invests meanings in displays. Indeed, it has been implied that this is a tendency caused by the undermining of dominant taxonomies (Silverstone 1988, Macdonald & Silverstone 1990) in an era of social fragmentation. This museum is not sustained by a classificatory structure. There now has to be a human appeal that is based around intelligible claims about how past events occurred. The most readily accessible way of making this appeal is in terms of narratives. Perhaps we should not ask why history is thus represented but whether it could be otherwise. Rather than stressing the 'vertigo' produced by current social changes perhaps:-

"We ought to ask instead whether the plea for a radically unformed temporal experience is not in itself the product of a fascination for the unformed that is one of the features of modernity. In short, when thinkers or literary critics seem to yield to a nostalgia for order or, worse, to the horror of chaos, what really moves them in the final analysis, may be a genuine recognition of the paradoxes of time beyond the loss of meaning characteristic of one particular culture - our own."

Ricoeur (1984:72).

A sense of time as narrative is embedded in this sort of museum. And it is narrative practices that perform the past in the present (cf Wright 1985:14-15). But in my narrative on narratives, it has been the consistent intent to denaturalise what appears to be a self-evident account of the canals. And the effort that this takes appears to be an indicator of the appeal of narrative temporality. Consistently emphasising the fabricated nature of narratives, is almost a back-handed compliment. Perhaps the effort involved is a mark of how stories provide events with a 'minimal readablity' in western culture (Morris 1988:194). Perhaps one can go a little further by suggesting a connection in the

way dominant groups show the greatest support for narratives of progress (Merriman 1991) and are numerically over-represented amongst museum visitors. Likewise one can recognise the delegitimising of alternative narratives as beneficial to currently dominant social groups.

Work with visitors suggests the limits to this form of analysis. There is no basic story that is absorbed osmotically. Visitors actively take and rework the elements of the museum, since, unlike reading, museum visiting is a social activity. But then they are spinning more narratives (Silverstone 1988), connecting personal and collective stories to the museum's account. Academic commentators, in turn, spin more narratives about these accounts. The question is not whether or how visitors follow or deviate in various ways from a 'basic' storyline. Rather it is that time is interpreted via narrative practices.

Thus, what I wish to end on is the sense that we are now certainly telling more accounts of our past to ourselves. These are not just hegemonic accounts but reconstructions of accounts that take a multitude of forms - such as the biographical videos of the BBCs community programming, or the efforts of oral historians to write the everyday stories of those marginalised by grand narratives. Perhaps this narrative aporia expresses a need to order and reorder our pasts and render them accessible to human experience in human narratives. Stories do not just tell a fixed past, but recreate pasts in the process of telling. Within the museum system, the structure of alterity/domestication of the past is being bridged narratively. And these narrative structures allow visitors to both 'relive' the past and then distance themselves from it. The museums provide a coherent account of time in which to insert personal

knowledge. Perhaps a less linear narrative would invite visitors to retell history from different perspectives.

Acknowledgements.
My thanks are due to Barbara Adam, Nigel Thrift and Klaus Dodds who read earlier drafts of this paper and made invaluable suggestions. I would also thank the three anonymous referees whose differing comments helped clarify several points. Any remaining flaws are my responsibility alone.

References.

Annis, S. (1986) The Museum as a Staging Ground for Symbolic Action. Museum 38/3: 168-171.

Bennett, T. (1988) Museums and 'the People'. pp 63-84 In ed. R. Lumley The Museum Time Machine: Putting Cultures on Display. London: Comedia

Bourdieu, P. (1991) In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology. UK: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. & Darbel, A. (1991) For the Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Public [French Editions Minuit 1969] UK: Polity Press.

Branigan, E. (1992) Narrative Comprehension and Film. London: Routledge.

Carr, D. (1986) Time, Narrative and History. Bloomington, USA: Indiana University Press.

Castoriadis, C. (1987) The Imaginary Institution of Society. UK: Polity Press.

_____ (1991) Time and Creation. pp 38-64 In eds. J. Bender & D. Wellberg. Chronotypes: the Construction of Time. California, USA: Stanford University Press.

Cohan, S. & Shires, L. (1988) Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction. Hants., UK: Routledge.

DeConcini, B. (1990) Narrative Remembering. Lanham, MD./ NY /London: University of America Press.

Eisenstein, S. (1943) The Film Sense. UK: faber & faber.

Fabian, J. (1991) Of Dogs Alive, Birds Dead and Time to Tell a Story. pp 185-204 In eds. J. Bender & D. Wellberg. Chronotypes: the Construction of Time. California, USA: Stanford University Press.

Fleming, D. (1992) All Museums Aspire to the State of the Art. New Statesman & Society (5) 211: 36.

Greimas, A. J. (1985) The Love-Life of a Hippopotamus: A seminar with AJ Greimas. pp340-62 In ed. M. Blonsky On Signs. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Harbison, R. (1977) Eccentric Spaces. New York: A Knopf.

Hewison, R. (1987) The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline. UK: Methuen.

Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1992) Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge. Andover, UK: Routledge.

Jordanova, L. (1989) Objects of Knowledge: a Historical Perspective on Museums pp 22-41 In P Vergo The New Museology. UK: Reaktion.

Kelly, R. (1987) Museums as Status Symbols II: Attaining the Status of Having Been. pp 1-38 In ed. R. Belk Advances in Non-Profit Marketing (vol 2). Greenwich, CT/ London: JAI Press.

LaCapra, D. (1991) The Temporality of Rhetoric. pp 118-146 In eds. J. Bender & D. Wellberg. Chronotypes the Construction of Time. California, USA: Stanford University Press.

Lumley, R. (1988) The Museum Time Machine: Putting Cultures on Display. London: Comedia.

Macdonald, S. & Silverstone, R. (1990) Rewriting the Museums' Fictions: Taxonomies, Stories and Readers. Cultural Studies 4 (2): 176-191.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) The Phenomenology of Perception. Andover, Hants.: Routledge & Kegan Paul

Merriman, N. (1991) Beyond the Glass Case: the Past, the Heritage and the Public in Britain. Leicester: Leicester University Press.

Morris, M. (1988) Things to do with Shopping Centres. pp 193-224 In ed. S. Sheridan Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism. London: Verso.

Ricoeur, P. (1980) Narrative Time Critical Inquiry 7 (1): 169-190.

_____ (1984) Time and Narrative (vol 1). USA: University of Chicago Press.

_____ (1985) Time and Narrative (vol 2). USA: University of Chicago Press.

_____ (1988) Time and Narrative (vol 3). USA: University of Chicago Press.

_____ (1992) Interview with Jonathan R,e Talking Liberties. London: Channel 4.

Samuel, R. (1992) The Eye of History. New Statesman & Society 5 (233): 38-44.

Shotter, J. (1988) The Social Construction of Remembering and Forgetting. pp 129-38 In ed. D. Middleton & D. Edwards Collective Remembering. Newbury/Delhi: SAGE.

Silverstone, R. (1988) Museums and the Media: A Theoretical and Methodological Exploration. International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship 7: 231-241.

Wright, P. (1985) On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain. London: Verso.

Zizek, S. (1991) For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor. London: Verso.